

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5525
DOUG ROBERTS/BEIRUT

FEBRUARY 13, 1978

LEBANON: WHAT WENT WRONG?

ANNCR:

VOA'S DOUG ROBERTS IN BEIRUT REPORTS IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT THAT THE NEXT FEW DAYS MAY PROVE CRUCIAL FOR LEBANON, SHAKEN LAST WEEK BY THE WORST ROUND OF FIGHTING SINCE THE CIVIL WAR WAS BROUGHT TO A HALT AT THE END OF NINETEEN SEVENTY SIX.

VOICE:

WHEN THE TWENTY FIVE THOUSAND OR SO SYRIAN PEACE KEEPING TROOPS MOVED INTO BEIRUT FIFTEEN MONTHS AGO, THEY WERE WELCOMED WITH CONSIDERABLE RELIEF AND EVEN JUBILATION BY A VAST MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION. THE SAVAGE WAR BETWEEN LEBANON'S TIGHTLY KNIT CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND THE ALLIANCE OF LEFTIST AND PALESTINIAN FORCES WAS QUICKLY BROUGHT TO A HALT. BUT SINCE THEN VERY LITTLE PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE IN EFFORTS TO RECONCILE THE FORMER COMBATANTS. AT THE SAME TIME, THERE HAVE BEEN PERIODIC OUTBURSTS OF VIOLENCE IN BEIRUT, WITH GUN BATTLES, KIDNAPPINGS AND ASSASSINATIONS.

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CHRISTIAN FORCES AND SYRIAN TROOPS WERE INITIALLY GOOD...BOTH FOUGHT AGAINST THE PALESTINIANS AND LEFTIST DURING THE CLOSING STAGES OF THE CIVIL WAR. BUT SINCE THEN, RELATIONS BETWEEN DAMASCUS AND THE P.L.O. AND ITS LEBANESE ALLIES HAVE GREATLY IMPROVED. AND, AT THE SAME TIME, TENSIONS HAVE EMERGED BETWEEN THE SYRIANS AND AT LEAST SOME SEGMENTS OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

THE TOP CHRISTIAN LEADER, WHITE HAired FORMER PRESIDENT CAMILLE CHAMOUN HAS BEEN COMPLAINING BITTERLY ABOUT THE CONDUCT OF SYRIAN TROOPS HERE IN RECENT WEEKS AND HE NOW WANTS THEM TO LEAVE LEBANON AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. WHEN FIGHTING BROKE OUT LAST

WEEK, ONLY SYRIAN TROOPS AND LEBANESE ARMY REGULARS WERE INITIALLY INVOLVED. IT WAS APPARENTLY TOUCHED OFF BY A QUARREL WHEN SYRIAN TROOPS TRIED TO SET UP A CHECK POINT IN FRONT OF A LEBANESE ARMY BARRACKS. BUT MISTER CHAMOUN SAW THE FIGHTING AS A SYRIAN ATTEMPT AGAINST THE INTEGRITY OF LEBANON. AND FOR THE NEXT FOUR DAYS HIS YOUNG MILITIAMEN WERE OUT ON THE STREETS FIGHTING THE SYRIANS. WHEN IT WAS OVER, THE MILITIAMEN CLAIMED VICTORY, AND BY ALL ACCOUNTS THE SYRIAN FORCES DID SUFFER HEAVY CASUALTIES.

BUT IT SEEMS CLEAR TO MANY OBSERVERS HERE THAT THE MILITIAMEN COULD NOT HOPE TO WAGE A PROLONGED STRUGGLE AGAINST THE SYRIAN TROOPS. AND IT WAS APPARENTLY THIS REALIZATION THAT KEPT THE MAIN CHRISTIAN FACTION -- THE PHALANGIST -- OUT OF THE FIGHTING, AT LEAST OFFICIALLY.

OVER THE WEEKEND, AS THE FIGHTING DIED DOWN, SYRIA'S FOREIGN MINISTER, ABDEL HALIM KHADDAM, DROVE IN FROM DAMASCUS, TO DISCUSS WAYS TO EASE THE SITUATION WITH LEBANESE PRESIDENT ELIAS SARKIS. CHRISTIAN POLITICAL LEADERS ALSO TOOK PART IN THE DISCUSSIONS. A CONCILIATORY TONE EMERGED FROM THOSE MEETINGS, AND AGREEMENT WAS REACHED ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JOINT MILITARY TRIBUNAL TO DETERMINE WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE BLOODSHED. CREATION OF THE TRIBUNAL IS EXPECTED TO GAIN THE APPROVAL FOR THE LEBANESE PARLIAMENT WHEN IT MEETS HERE ON TUESDAY.

THE TRIBUNAL WILL BE MADE UP OF TWO SYRIAN AND TWO LEBANESE ARMY OFFICIERS. AND A JOINT MILITARY COMMITTEE HAS ALREADY BEGUN PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATIONS. THE TRIBUNAL'S DECISIONS WILL BE FINAL AND IRREVOCABLE AND ARE LIKELY TO PROVE CRUCIAL FOR THE FUTURE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE PEACE KEEPING FORCES AND THE

LEBANESE, ESPECIALLY THE CHRISTIANS.

(OPT) ONE LOCAL EDITORS PREDICTS THAT IF EITHER SIDE APPEARS TO BE SEEKING REVENGE THROUGH THE TRIBUNAL THERE WILL BE MORE BLOODSHED...A SENTIMENT THAT IS APPARENTLY SHARED BY MANY HERE. IT IS A FEELING THAT IS LIKELY TO WEIGH HEAVILY ON THE LEBANESE AND SYRIAN OFFICERS AS THEY ATTEMPT TO DETERMINE WHAT WENT WRONG HERE LAST WEEK AND WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE. (END OPT)

JS/RCS